

Project: "Informing' and transmitting knowledge? The bull and the book in anti-Muhammad legend from Dante to Filippino Lippi"

With this title I wish to share the premises and some conclusions of a book project called *Whispers of the Dove, Echos of Byzantium: The Bull and the Holy Book*. Why the question mark in the title?

I owe this title to the lectures and discussion we enjoyed in this summer seminar. In fact, before coming to the NEH summer institute, my book could be considered completed, but I did not have a theoretical frame within which to locate the premises, the approaches, and the results of my research.

The readings by Charles Burnett, Karla Mallette and Gerard Wiegers, as well as these scholars' contributions on the role of translation's transmission of knowledge in the network of the Mediterranean – as brilliantly argued by Sharon Kinoshita – have been illuminating for me.

My book enquires into one of the two legends surrounding Muhammad: the bull carrying the holy book, the Koran, among its horns to a crowd gathered on a mountain, similar to the episode of Moses receiving the ten commandments from God. I study the journey of that legend and retrace the network of its transmission from Syria through Byzantium, and the role of the book in that legend from Dante to the painter Filippino Lippi in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Despite what Lepage, editor of *Otia Machomete* and *Roman de Mahomet* and Southern claim that «with the legend of the cow that carries the Koran between its horns and the coffin of Muhammad suspended by virtue of a magnet, we are in pure folklore», the legend of the bull carrying the Holy Book entails a number of problematics that force scholars of the Mediterranean to deal with the forms, modalities and interferences in transmission of knowledge from Byzantium to Western Europe.

The readings by Charles Burnett – but also by Gerard Wiegers, who also suggested we read Van Koningsveld and Burman's contributions on transmission of knowledge in the relation Islam and Christianity – made me finally find the key I was missing to explain what my research was about. My study was definitely not trying to show that Christian Orthodox intellectuals who fabricated the legend of the bull carrying the holy book to deceive people, tried to destroy Islam and the reputation of Muhammad. On the contrary, those readings helped me to locate my study in the problem of knowledge transmission. The importance of the book as a visual physical object in the legend of the bull that seals the transmission and gives comfort to those who receive a knowledge of a new faith, is at the centre of my investigation. Within this perspective, I started wondering why Dante put Muhammad among scismatics and not among heretics and during the NEH I found an answer to my question in the verb "to inform" that I use in the same sense given to the verb by Dante, of 'giving shape', substantial form.

The image that remains with me leaving this seminar is in P.S.J. Van Koningsveld's article "Andalusian –Arabic Manuscripts". Van Koningsveld dealing with the "scattered items of indirect information about the world of Arabic manuscripts in medieval Christian Spain", relies on reports of historians and from old catalogues and book-lists. Thus he evokes an episode that he read in a chronicle of an Arab historian about a XII Century scholar and bibliophile from Malaga who had sent out a ship loaded with grain to one of the territories of the Christians suffering from famine at the time. The grain was exchanged with books only, and the ship returned with 'many precious books, which many of his colleagues at the time had been unable to obtain' (p. 78).

What kind of knowledge is that book transmitting? What does a book mean for a medieval writer? What do Dante and the Renaissance painter Filippino both condemn? Here is the importance I give to the book in my book project *Whispers of the Dove*.

Whose idea was that strategy of the book? Was there an instigator like in the legend of the dove or is Muhammad's responsibility? Who wrote the book? Did Dante know the legend of the bull carrying the holy book and why did he not locate Muhammad among heretics? These are some of the questions I raised in conducting my research *Whispers of the Dove* and for which I found some answers during my weeks at the NEH seminar in Barcelona in July 2012.